



Smart Districts:

Restructuring
Urban Systems
from the School Up

Fall 2013

Making The Case for “Smart Districts”

There is no shortage of ideas for improving urban schools: higher standards; aligned assessments and curriculum; better teacher evaluation and support; more and better parent choices; blended learning; and so on.

All necessary, but not sufficient.

What's missing is any recognition of the importance of *district systems* in promoting and sustaining improvement as leaders come and go. A lot of energy is spent remodeling each of the rooms while neglecting the basic structure. Until urban school districts are organized in smarter ways, it will remain impossible to scale or sustain any worthy reform.

Creating such “smart districts” starts with accepting three truths supported by decades of evidence in the field.

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First, urban students need seamless supports and a coherent pathway all the way from kindergarten through high school.

The current approach, where the most motivated parents typically have to re-enter the lottery every time their child is ready to advance a level, almost guarantees students will fall off track. Urban families deserve the same continuity, security, and quality that suburban parents take for granted when they choose a community and its schools. Once urban families choose a neighborhood, they should be equally confident that their child has a clear, high-quality educational route all the way through graduation and the opportunity to choose an excellent system.

Case in Point: The almost total lack of vertical integration and articulation between high schools and middle schools, particularly in cities with lots of choice. How many middle school teachers are deeply familiar with the high school curriculum they are preparing students for – and meet with high school teachers to assure a seamless hand-off of their students to 9th grade?

Second, the structure of urban school districts and in particular the traditional central office model is broken and unfixable in its current form. Rather than leading reform, the bureaucracy of central offices gets in the way. Time and again, even the most accomplished urban school leaders have underestimated the tendency of a risk-averse culture to resist change. As Joel Klein said after eight years of implementing some of the nation's boldest changes in New York City: “We should have been bolder.” Change won’t come from within the central office bureaucracy. It’s time to stop wasting money “fixing” the central office in its current form. Restructure much of the traditional central office and transfer many responsibilities and accountability closer to schools, retaining centralized systems and guidance only where they’re most efficient and necessary for equity.

Case in Point: How many urban districts have transformed their central offices into high- performing units and sustained that performance and culture across two superintendents or more? Maybe Long Beach. Any place else?

Third, total decentralization and autonomy at the school level doesn’t make sense either. Districts have a purpose. While compliance-driven central offices thwart innovation at every turn, one-school-at-a-time reform makes it too easy for kids to get lost between Day 1 and the diploma, and has little research to support the strategy. The best charters are proving this point as they network, cluster, and add grades to ultimately support students from kindergarten through grade 12. It makes more sense educationally, operationally, and financially to handle some limited functions centrally and others in a small cluster of schools - instead of one school at a time. Principals already are overwhelmed with too many responsibilities.

Case in Point: Think transportation, food services, and the infrastructure for data systems as appropriate centralized support functions. It also makes sense for central offices to at least pre-qualify the best research-based curriculum so schools can make good academic choices.

A Cluster Model

In response to these realities, we urge urban superintendents and school boards to adopt a new vision for districts and start with at least one community cluster of schools, organized around a high school and elementary and middle schools that are or could be feeder schools. A mini-district such as this offers the best of all worlds: the autonomy of decentralized charters, the scale and infrastructure of a larger system, and the k-12 coherence that suburban parents and students already have.

A city with a portfolio of such community mini-districts would be a “smart district.” Each cluster of schools should have enough freedom to control its own educational destiny, with a small unit – what we call a Lead Partner unit located in the high school and set up through an RFP or internally by the superintendent – that has authority over staffing, budgets, programs, and schedules. But in return, hold these Lead Partner units accountable for results through a three-year performance contract with the superintendent.

with a “Lead Partner”

A common-sense third way

One can easily envision a three-tier structure. Schools would handle day-to-day classroom instruction. The Lead Partner would provide critical HR and operational support to its several schools, integrate the k-12 academies, manage academic and student wraparound and community engagements, coordinate all contractors and vendors, and run interference for schools with central office. Central office would continue to take the lead in setting district-wide standards, monitoring and reporting on performance, handling procurement, managing an equitable enrollment process, serving as the go-between with the federal and state governments, and ensuring an equitable academic program across the district.

Think of this approach as a common-sense third way between the proven dysfunction of top-down centralization and the built-in inefficiencies at the school level.

An opportunity to foster a culture of excellence.

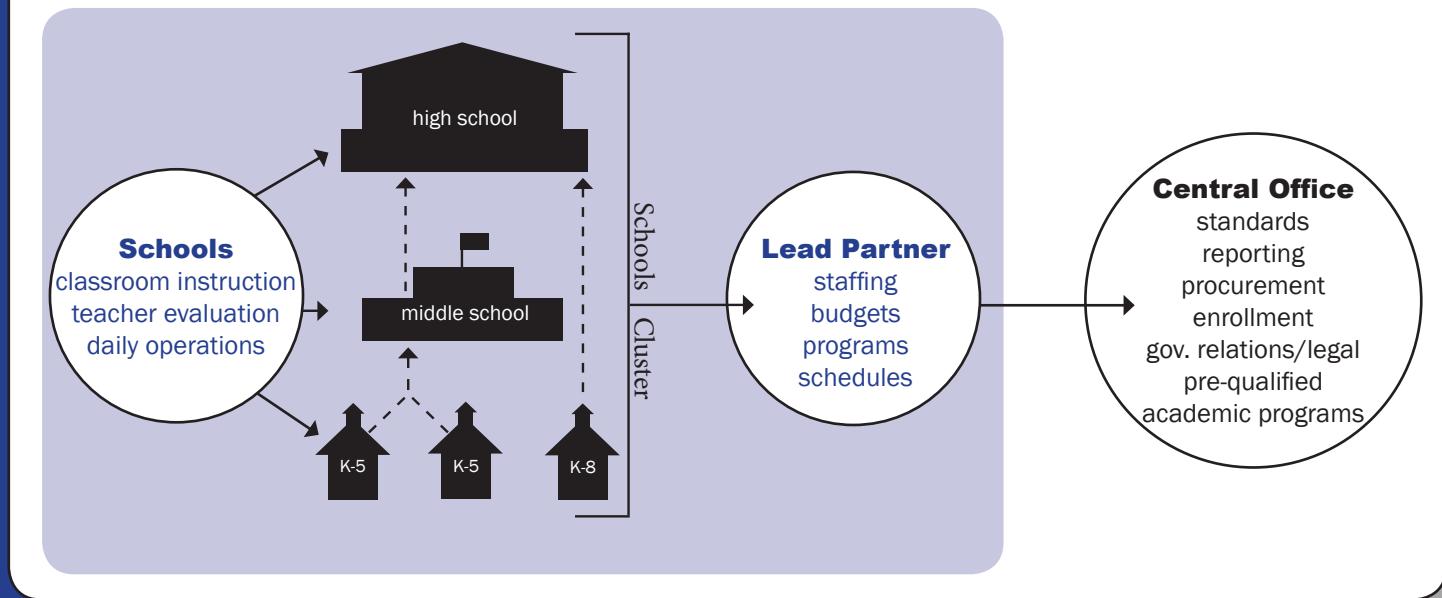
The most successful district turnarounds and charter management networks, from AUSL to KIPP, show what’s possible with this kind of win-win approach: major changes in school culture in Year 1 and double-digit academic gains by Year 2.

A talent strategy

Systemic, structural changes like these aren’t ends in themselves, but a way to help districts do what matters most: Attract and keep great school leaders and teachers in schools where they’re needed most.

A structure like this creates opportunities for our best principals to become “super-principals,” in charge of several schools instead of just one. Great principals like these are the only way schools will be able to get and keep great teachers. And the only way traditional districts will stem their “brain drain” of talent to charters is if great educators have more chances to work with talented colleagues.

A Smart District includes multiple School Clusters



Turnaround: Entry Point

The Federal and State Role

School turnaround policies and funding offer a perfect opportunity for the boldest district leaders to start creating school clusters — but federal and state governments need to make it more attractive to do so. And they need to make it a lot harder for districts to keep getting away with the “turnaround-lite” approaches that decades of experience prove don’t work, such as hiring a few ex-administrators to parachute in to “consult.”

School turnaround wisely focuses on the bottom 5% of schools in each state. These are the chronic under-performers where there is no excuse for continued tinkering — and every reason to be bold. As we pointed out in our landmark 2007 report (*The Turnaround Challenge*): “Turning around the ‘bottom five’ percent of schools is the crucible of education reform. They represent our greatest, clearest need — and therefore a great opportunity to bring about fundamental change....If status quo thinking continues to shield dysfunctions that afflict these schools, there can be little hope for truly substantial reform throughout the system.”

Conversely, if districts can use turnaround policies and funding to get it right with one cluster of schools that includes the bottom performers plus other schools at risk, they can use it as a proof point to scale up to additional clusters — and in the process create a “smart district.”

A few progressive districts already are embracing boldness. More should do the same.

Call to Action for Policymakers

To encourage more such innovation, we call on policy makers to stop wasting money trying to fix a broken, centralized structure or keep assuming innovation flourishes best in single schools by themselves. Neither meets the test of evidence ... nor the needs of urban families and students. Instead they should:

1. Create incentives for high school/feeder school community clusters
2. Create competition for “proof points” to lead the way – test strategies
3. Stop funding traditional “fix-the-central-office” strategies

Next Steps

With the help of an expert advisory group of educators, leaders, and thinkers, we will be exploring the implications of this approach for restructuring school districts. For instance:

- What’s the right balance between centralization and decentralization?
- What should be the primary roles of central office ... intermediary Lead Partner organizations ... and schools?
- How should each level be held accountable for performance?
- How can we recruit, support and retain a new generation of “super principals,” Lead Partners, and others to lead these mini-districts of school clusters?
- What can traditional districts learn from the best charter management organizations?
- Who are the early adopters and what can we learn from them?

If you would like to join this conversation, email smartdistrict@massinsight.org or check out our *In the Zone* blog at turnaroundzone.org.

Mass Insight EDUCATION

Mass Insight Education is nonprofit organization, founded in 1997, that has been a state and national leader in strengthening public school systems. Its *School Turnaround Group* is nationally recognized for its research, advocacy, and state and district initiatives to transform the country’s lowest-performing schools and rethink district structures. U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan called its 2007 study “the bible of school turnaround.” Its *Mass Math + Science Initiative* is the state’s largest academic high school math and science program aimed at underserved students. MMSI is expanding access to rigorous Advanced Placement coursework and closing achievement gaps in more than 50 high schools statewide. Now in its 4th year, MMSI has consistently delivered impressive results: increased enrollment in math, English and science AP courses; more qualifying AP scores; and more students starting and graduating from college.